

New Conservation Programs and Partnerships

How Public Sector Technical Service Providers will Participate

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Good morning on behalf of the nation's 3,000 conservation districts. I thank you for inviting us to be here today to share some thoughts with you on conservation programs and partnerships and the Farm Bill's new Technical Service Provider initiative. Gary Mast our new national President had planned to make this presentation, however he is feeling a little under the weather and was unable to come into Washington for this conference. He did however ask me to extend his regrets and reinforce conservation district interest in helping to ensure that the new federal conservation programs are successfully implemented. As many of you may know, conservation districts have a long history of working with USDA in coordinating and carrying out comprehensive natural resource management programs and in providing technical assistance to producers and other cooperators. We welcome the expansion of this concept to bring new and much needed players into the arena.

Historic Opportunity

Today we have a historic opportunity to dramatically accelerate private lands conservation work throughout the nation.

Over the past several years there has been a rather rigorous debate centered on agriculture's impacts on the environment; the approach that should be used to address these challenges; and the roles the various stakeholders should play in addressing conservation objectives.

This debate came to a head during the development of the Conservation Title of the Farm Bill. Through it, consensus emerged that conservation is an integral component of modern day production agriculture and that the time had come to ramp up public investments in this important area.

When the Farm Bill was signed into law last spring, the Conservation title was seen by many as the centerpiece of the bill. According to the congressional sponsors and the Bush Administration, the Conservation Title:

- authorizes an 80% increase in Federal funding,
- establishes a new generation of programs to address working lands,
- emphasizes the use of incentives to accomplish conservation goals, and
- embraces bottom-up decision-making; local leadership and partnerships.

Who would have thought this would have happened or perhaps more importantly, why did it happen?

There are several reasons, but two clearly stand out. First, the agriculture community came together, acknowledged it was part of the problem and demonstrated it was ready to get down to work.

Second, decision-makers finally woke up and realized that farmers and ranchers produce more than agricultural commodities. They produce high value conservation commodities as well. As the stewards of the land, they improve the natural environment and through it the quality of life for all. Farmers and ranchers create habitat for diverse species of fish and wildlife; protect water supplies and improve air quality; check sprawl; and maintain open space.

In short, farmers and ranchers produce public benefits, and through the Farm Bill policy makers decided that it made sense to invest in programs that provide these benefits.

The bottom line is that new resources and tools have been made available to us and the future is now calling us to action. This is an opportunity none of us can afford to squander.

Our Challenge

Getting the Farm Bill passed was the easy part. The real work of conservation lies ahead and there are a number of enormous challenges on the horizon. Two in particular stand out. The first is the workload we face. A few statistics document this point:

- Agricultural lands dominate 70% of the American landscape.
- Excessive soil erosion still occurs on over 100 million acres of cropland.
- Approximately a third of our rangelands are in a state of deteriorated condition.
- EPA estimates that more than 300,000 miles of rivers and shorelines as well as 5 million acres of lakes are impaired- much of which is attributable to non-point pollution including agricultural operations.
- Half of the nation's endangered species rely on private land for at least 80% of their habitat.
- More than half of the nation's total timber supply comes from privately owned nonindustrial forestland and much of this needs management assistance as a result of disease, pest infestation and overgrowth.
- As a nation we are losing millions of acres of farmland, forest and open space per year to development - and the fragmentation of these lands is causing even more challenges.

Yes, we have made a lot of progress over the years, but there is still a tremendous amount of work that needs to be done and the federal government can't and shouldn't be expected to address these issues alone.

The second major challenge involves expectations:

- Our customers are counting on us for help;
- The public is looking to us to produce quantifiable environmental improvements and benefits; and
- Decision-makers are demanding greater accountability for the increased investments they are making in private lands conservation programs.

All of these groups are calling for action and results. And they want it now!

The workload and expectation challenges we face require us to think out of the box, explore new ideas and forge new partnerships.

This is where the new Technical Service Provider Initiative USDA is spearheading fits in. The job of providing private lands conservation services is far too big for any one partner to handle alone. In reality, it will take the combined resources of the public and private sector to successfully address the private lands conservation challenges we face.

Since the enactment of the 2002 Farm Bill—and even before then—conservation districts have been actively promoting this idea as way to get some of the much needed technical assistance to help producers put more conservation on the land. This past November we participated in the USDA sponsored Technical Service Provider (Farm Bill) Summit that brought together a number of stakeholders to garner input on how the initiative should be implemented. We also published a feature center spread in the January – February, 2003 issue of *NACD News & Views*, a bi-monthly publication that reaches more than 25,000 conservationists nationwide, to help our members and partners learn more about the TSP.

We have also been active with a group of about 20 organizations with an interest in TSP policy and procedures and believe that this group and the dialogue so far have contributed many ideas for successful implementation.

In addition, we are working with a group of conservation leaders from several sectors of the agricultural, conservation and business communities to develop and refine a concept we call the “Master Conservation Planner.” The Master Conservation Planner concept envisions having a professional whose cross-disciplinary training would be needed to coordinate the many separate and highly focused disciplines that would be utilized in providing technical assistance to producers.

Even though the comment period on the interim final rule is scheduled to close this week, we need to keep in mind that since it is an interim rule, we will still be able to provide input as it is rolled out. As we gather information on how the initiative is working we can provide additional input to NRCS to further fine-tune it.

Public Sector Role

We were asked to provide some insight into what role the public sector will play in helping implement the new conservation programs we have been discussing. The answer is straightforward- a major role!

Conservation districts along with a myriad of federal, state, and local government agencies have been providing private lands conservation support services for decades. They have the knowledge, experience, capabilities that will be needed to respond to the workload and expectations I just mentioned. They also have the trust of land managers which is perhaps their most valuable asset.

Public sector service providers can play a key in helping USDA implement the Farm Bill Conservation programs and their resources need to be fully utilized.

Principle roles for public sector service providers include disseminating information and education materials; providing local leadership for program development and implementation; recruiting and training TSPs; and providing technical assistance directly so long as it doesn't unfairly compete with private sector service providers.

Examples of potential public sector service providers abounds:

- State agencies including agriculture, natural resources, conservation and water quality;
- Local agencies including soil and water conservation districts and county government; and
- NGO's including groups like Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, Nature Conservancy and others

Although public sector service providers are very excited about this opportunity, we also understand that we need to be patient in gearing up to implement the TSP initiative. It took a number of years to make this idea a reality, and, likewise, it will take some time to get it up and running full steam—thousands of new people will have to be trained and certified and many who are apprehensive about the concept will have to be convinced that it will work. I'm confident, though, that given the time, the patience and, of course, the funding, we can make it a success.

All of us can play important roles in making the TSP initiative work. You can get involved by providing input through your state technical committees and local work groups convened by conservation districts. Through these channels you can help identify potential TSP providers and explain to them how they can get involved in the effort.

As outlined in the interim rule, producers will have several options for obtaining technical assistance. They can still receive assistance directly from NRCS as they have in the past. But under the new TSP initiative they have several other options. They can seek out private TSPs, engage them directly and be reimbursed by USDA. The interim rule says NRCS expects to utilize private sector vendors as much as possible, but in many areas there simply won't be enough private vendors to fill the gap.

That's where public agencies—like conservation districts, other government agencies and nongovernment organizations—can play a role. Through the use of cooperative and contribution agreements, NRCS will work through these public agencies to get technical assistance to producers.

As indicated earlier, these public agencies can also choose to compete as private vendors if they choose, and if state and local laws and ordinances permit. But that's a decision that should be weighed carefully. NRCS has indicated that it will evaluate and possibly modify its relationships and agreements with historical conservation partners to avoid conflicts of interest. Public agencies should consider carefully the consequences of changing longstanding relationships with USDA in order to compete as private TSP providers.

Keys to Success

There are many keys to success in addressing private lands conservation objectives in America but three stand out as being absolutely critical.

The first is the need for local leadership. Every decision can't be made in Washington and success will be enhanced by the degree to which responsibility for program implementation is delegated to the lowest possible level.

The second is the need for a strong NRCS and flexibility in decision-making. It is imperative that NRCS's capabilities be maintained and enhanced as it will be needed in an even greater measure as conservation work is stepped up across the country. NRCS's State Conservationists should be delegated maximum authority for making program and management decisions that fit local conditions and needs. One size has never fit all and this adage holds for conservation program delivery as well.

The third is the need for adequate technical assistance funding. In our judgment funding will be the most important factor in the success of the TSP initiative. Funding to date for technical assistance falls far short of what NRCS needs to provide assistance through its own cadre of technical professionals, let alone bring on board a whole new team professionals outside the agency. Congress made provision for this when it enacted the Farm Bill programs by providing that the programs would pay for their own technical assistance, including the use of non-USDA vendors. This issue was further clarified in the recently passed FY '03 Omnibus Appropriation bill which the President signed into law last night. It will be absolutely essential to make sure this increased funding is available in order for NRCS to engage a significant number of non-USDA technical service providers.

The bottom line is that both financial assistance and technical assistance are needed and shortchanging technical assistance funding will quickly derail even the best implementation plan.

In closing, we believe the future is bright for private lands conservation in America. We also believe that the future is bright for a wide cross section of public and private sector technical service providers who can partner with USDA to support program delivery efforts.

The technical service provider initiative marks a sea change in the way we go about the business of getting technical assistance to producers and other cooperators. It's an opportunity to build new relationships as we work to get more conservation on the landscape. It's also opens the door to building new public support and increasing the visibility of conservation in the public eye. We have all worked hard to get to where we are today, but the real work is just beginning.

Secretary Veneman reminded us in yesterday's keynote address that in addressing challenges we must capitalize on the opportunities that lie before us. America's conservation districts see lots of opportunities in the private lands conservation arena and we are ready to get to work.